

## **Talk to Me**

### **(Tips for Interacting with People Who Have Disabilities)**

Not all barriers to inclusion of persons with disabilities in society are physical ones. Often, a first interaction with a person who has a disability can be awkward. Observing some basic rules of disability etiquette will make these interactions much more comfortable.

#### **In General**

- Treat all persons with respect. Call a person by his or her first name only when you're extending this familiarity to everyone present.
- Offer assistance to a person with a disability if you feel like it, but wait until your offer is accepted before you help, and listen to any instructions that person may want to give about the best way to assist them.
- When talking with someone who has a disability, speak directly to that person rather than through a companion who may be with them.
- Be considerate of the extra time it may take for a person with a disability to get things done or said. Let the person set the pace in walking and talking.
- Relax. Don't be embarrassed if you happen to use accepted, common expressions, such as "See you later" or "Got to be running along" that seem to relate to the person's disability.

#### **People with Mobility Disabilities**

- Any aid or equipment a person may use, such as a wheelchair, guide cane, walker, crutch or assistance animal is part of that person's personal space. Do not touch, push, pull or otherwise physically interact with an individual's body or equipment unless requested to do so. If it is necessary to move a person's mobility device, never do so without asking first.
- When conversing at length with a person in a wheelchair, sit or place yourself at that person's eye level, but do not kneel.
- Don't patronize people who use wheelchairs by patting them on the head.

#### **People with Cognitive Disabilities**

- Take the time necessary to assure clear understanding. Use simpler words and add gestures while you talk. Use precise language and try to employ words that relate to things you both can see. You may need to write down information or draw a simple picture.
- Be prepared to give the person the same information more than once in different ways.

### **People with Vision Disabilities**

- To guide a person who is blind, let him/her take your arm. Do not grab the person's arm. The person will walk about half a step behind you, following your body motions. If you encounter steps, curbs, or other obstacles, identify them (in case of steps, also identify whether they go up or down). In places too narrow for you to walk two abreast, bring your arm back and let the guided person follow you.
- When giving directions to a person who is blind, be as clear and specific as possible. Make sure to point out obstacles in the direct path of travel. If you're unsure of just how to direct the person, say something like, "I'd be happy to give you directions. How should I describe things?"
- When talking to an individual who is blind, use a normal tone and speed of voice. Shouting or speaking to an adult like a child is very insulting. Blindness does not effect hearing or intelligence. Speak directly to the person, not to a third party. When you are leaving a room, say so – anyone would feel foolish talking into thin air.
- Resist the temptation to pet a working guide dog. If the dog is distracted from its work, its owner can be in danger. Always ask permission of the owner before interacting with the dog.
- Use common sense and sensitivity. Most people who are blind have normal hearing. Comments like, "Isn't she brave!" or "Isn't it a shame he's blind." are usually heard and not appreciated.

### **People with Hearing Disabilities**

- To get the attention of a person who has a hearing disability, tap the person on the shoulder or wave your hand.
- Look directly at the person and speak clearly, slowly and expressively to establish if the person can read your lips. Not all persons with hearing impairments can lip read. Those who can rely on facial expressions and other body language to help in understanding.
- Show consideration by placing yourself facing the light source and keeping your hands and food away from your mouth when speaking. Keep mustaches well-trimmed.
- While shouting won't help, written notes can.

### **People with Speech Disabilities**

- Give whole, unhurried attention when you're talking to a person who has difficulty speaking. Keep your manner encouraging rather than correcting, be patient rather than speak for the person. When necessary, ask short questions that require short answers or a nod or shake of the head.
- Never pretend to understand if you are having difficulty doing so. Repeat what you understand. The person's reaction will assist you and guide you to understanding.

(Adapted from *"Removing Barriers to Health Care: A Guide for Health Professionals,"* North Carolina Office on Disability and Health, Raleigh, NC.